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Inspiring Creativity and Self-Confidence: The Power of Theatre in a Child's Life

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Laura Borgwardt

Candidate for B.F.A. Degree
in Acting with Honors

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Honors Capstone Project in Acting
APPROVED

Thesis Project Advisor: _____
(Elizabeth Ingram)

Honors Reader: _____
(Gerardine Clark)

Honors Director: _____
Samuel Gorovitz

Date: _____

~Abstract~

The main concept of this project was the transference of what I've learned at Syracuse University about drama and about myself to a group of young theatre students, for some of whom this was their first encounter with the theatrical process of putting on a play. Drama has played such an influential role in my life, giving me more confidence, a direction to head towards, and goals towards which I strive. I wanted to instill that same sense of self-worth in each of the students I worked with, giving them the tools necessary to explore a piece of theatre and the freedom to create imaginatively within the boundaries of the play. I don't expect every student I taught to go into acting professionally; that was not at all a goal of this program. Theatre skills are applicable in every area of the professional world, from a heightened sense of self-confidence that helps you present your ideas at a meeting to the ability to think creatively and become a problem solver of tomorrow. Theatre skills are life skills.

This program took the framework of other children's theatre classes that I've been privileged to work with and built upon them to emphasize the value of process-based theatre, while still catering to the desire of the community for a final product. I re-configured exercises that I had learned in theatre classes of my own, both at Syracuse and elsewhere, for the unique group of students enrolled in this particular program. I sought to challenge students without frustrating them and always maintain a safe, creative, and fun atmosphere in which we played.

Equally as important as the creative processes within the program were the tasks required of me as a producer. Before I even met the students I had to do work in the areas of advertising, finance, and organization. The two weeks I spent working with the kids was the culmination of several months of prep work, both in producing and directing roles.

The program itinerary balanced rehearsal for the show with exercises taught to enhance character development and acting technique. The program succeeded in introducing children to theatre within a non-threatening atmosphere that emphasized the importance of an ensemble and encouraged creativity. The actors were proud of what they performed and parents and others were impressed with how much we accomplished in such a short period of time. I valued the production that they presented but even more so, I valued the work that went into it. The transformations I witnessed—in terms of exploring creatively, building an ensemble, and emerging as more confident young people—are what I treasure most about this experience.

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~The Process~

Creating a two-week theatre program for children ages seven to twelve can be challenging not only its execution but in the planning stages as well. I had a head start in that aspect, having worked with Jacqui Shanda and Bethel Lutheran Church in the past and having them as excellent resources.

We started advertising the program in January, sending out flyers to the 2nd-6th graders at Bethel. I selected the play *Annie jr.* from Music Theatre International as the show for this program because of its appeal to the kids as well as its large cast size. The cast of *Annie jr.* includes several roles of varying sizes that can equally accommodate second graders and sixth graders. For some reason *Annie* has never been one of my favorite shows—probably due to the thousands of wigged little girls I’ve heard belting “Tomorrow” with their stage mothers hovering nearby, or to the unfortunate memory of having auditioned for the show in three different community theatres in one year because I was so desperate to be in a play—but throughout this process I have gradually acquired an affection for it.

While in Morocco I had a moment of epiphany, sparking my excitement about the program. My lack of enthusiasm about the show *Annie* vanished as I found a new way to look at the piece. I realized that

Annie revolves around the concept of reality verses the imaginary.

Characters are constantly pretending to be someone or somewhere else, and forever being brought back to reality. I decided to take this theme and expand upon it through the blocking and choreography. For example, the song “You’re Never Fully Dressed Without a smile” starts out as six orphan girls gathered around a radio that begin to pretend to be on the radio program. Throughout the number, boas are added and the curtain opens to reveal the entire cast singing and dancing in the imagined reality of these girls. By the end of the number the boas are gone, the curtain has closed, and the girls are left with only the memory of the fun they had created for themselves. I also had some ideas for the “NYC” song, including dancing buses, taxis, and the statue of liberty. I still knew that I would be unsuccessfully trying to get “It’s a Hard Knock Life” out of my head every day during and after the program, but I was revived in my excitement.

Other “pre-program” details included securing a performance venue, which brought along some challenges. I settled on moving the performance to a Saturday date in order to use the theatre at Oakwood Village, a retirement home where my grandfather used to live. I like Oakwood because the venue is the perfect size (an intimate two hundred twenty with additional space for wheelchairs and extra seating), they offer the use of their facility for no cost, and the residents of Oakwood are

invited to all performances in their auditorium and look forward to attending these kinds of events.

I bought materials and built some simple, yet effective, set pieces/props. At first I had the notion that the children would be able to help paint the set, taking time when they weren't busy during rehearsal to go into the other room and work on the set. However, looking at my proposed itinerary, I realized that there probably wouldn't be much time when they weren't busy! I worried whether the two weeks would be sufficient time to get everything ready for the performance of the show—in terms of the dances, songs, and scene work—as well as have time to paint taxis; therefore I decided to get that part out of the way.

The program ran from August 10th- August 22nd, rehearsing Monday-Friday from 8:30-12 and culminating in a performance on the evening of Saturday the 22nd, following dress rehearsal. The first day served as an introduction to the program, incorporating a sing-through, plot overview, choreography for the first song, and acting exercises. I held auditions on the second day, during which the kids gave me an idea of what roles that they would like, singing and reading for those parts. Tuesday night was dreadful as I sat down to cast the show, having the wonderful problem of too many talented kids who could play the major roles. The night also included enlisting my family for help writing lines for three characters that I had to add in order to give more kids bigger parts. On Wednesday the actors received their roles and we moved right into

blocking and choreography, leaving little time for wallowing over casting decisions. I did have to re-assign one role and change the gender of a few others in order to make everyone happy, but I think it went relatively well.

One of the most important choices that I had to make involved what to include and exclude from my original itinerary in order to keep the kids engaged and keep the program functioning at a level necessary for success. Before I even met the young actors I had the job of designing the program, which included detailing an itinerary of activities and rehearsals. Thankfully my experience working with children in the past clued me into the fact that inevitably, upon meeting the actors, my plans would change.

I always composed lesson plans that included way more material than we could possibly accomplish in one day. I knew this going in, and so, when we didn't finish everything on the list I was not discouraged. I never wanted to be in the position where I had run out of things to do and was left scrambling for activities. In the moment you pause to think about what to do next, you have already lost their attention.

The only time this situation arose was on the day of the performance after the final dress rehearsal. We had gotten through the show and I didn't want to wear the kids out, nor did I want to attempt to perfect things that would only frustrate the kids and diminish the confidence they had in their production. So I turned to the one thing that I had left out in the previous days because of time: games. With twenty-

three energetic kids, a challenging show, and only one director, I had to prioritize.

The primary focus of this rehearsal period was the show, but I definitely wanted to work in some acting exercises and activities that would further character development and creativity on the part of the actors. I wanted this program to be process-based, not solely driven towards a product. Though the games that I had planned to introduce do develop creativity and spontaneity, they don't directly influence the production, and therefore I decided to cut them. I do think that if the kids had been able to focus more we would have gotten through things at a faster pace, leaving time for games, but for this particular group that aspect was very hard. They certainly did not lack spontaneity.

Nurturing creativity without diminishing artistic values is a major challenge for a director of children's theatre, very probably for any director. I wanted to encourage kids to create a character and make his or her own acting choices throughout the rehearsal process. I tried to provide an impetus for making creative choices through exercises and flexible blocking, helping them find a new "walk" for their character as well as idiosyncrasies that they might have. I also issued character interviews that helped them think about their character in perhaps a new way. The young actors took the ideas that I gave them (in the blocking, choreography, etc) and wove in their own choices. Some of these moments lived only in rehearsal and failed to reappear during the production, but the fact that

they happened remains a triumph. It was sometimes difficult for me to relinquish control over my vision of what I wanted the show to be, but this program was meant to be an experience in educational theatre and should represent the techniques that the kids have learned and the ideas that they have expressed. The actors are not puppets to play to the vision inside a director's head. To view them as such is an insult to their vast ingenuity. I believe that kids are innately imaginative; they just need an outlet for that creativity. An example of the balance between letting a child be creative and retaining the integrity and clarity of the rehearsal process occurred earlier in the summer at Shorewood Summer Drama when a child's incessant suggestions disrupted the rehearsal continually and had to be quelled somewhat. It wasn't that she had bad ideas; it was just that they were being expressed at inappropriate times and intervals instead of being incorporated into her acting without the unnecessary commentary.

The young actors in my program spanned the entire spectrum in terms of acting ability and maturity level, but I think having a wide range of skill sets and training as well as a rather large age range (seven to twelve) raised the bar in terms of expectation, giving the children with less experience people to look up to. The seven-year-old girl in my program accomplished quite amazing things in order to keep up with the rest of the class. At Shorewood Summer Drama the ages are separated into smaller sections so that there is a six to seven year old program, which never would have attempted choreography or blocking at the level that these

kids worked. She was cast as Sandy (the dog) and President Roosevelt (in an effort to give her a few lines). She came to me with her mother the day after I assigned roles, asking me to re-cast the part of FDR, as she thought the role was too overwhelming. As Sandy, she started out timidly; crawling onstage at her cue, but that was pretty much the extent to which she took her characterization. One day I got down on the floor and barked, panted, and nuzzled Annie along with her. She began to feel more comfortable with her role and took advantage of her freedom, developing a really nice sense of play. The audience loved her. Of course, she looked adorable with her golden locks peaking out from the hood of her furry body suit, but her periodic barking throughout Annie's "Tomorrow" made the audience wild with glee!

Though the twenty-three young thespians exuded exorbitant amounts of energy and were trying at times, my biggest frustrations and challenges related more to the parents than the children. Many of these families were new to drama programs and did not seem to understand the commitment necessary to a production, especially considering the extraordinarily short rehearsal period. After getting a phone call at 6:30am from a grandmother saying that her granddaughter would not be at rehearsal that day due to a doctor's appointment or the next day due to middle school orientation, I will admit, I was less than pleased.

I found throughout this process, as with much of my work with children and the community, that it is wise to establish a "go with the flow"

philosophy. It is highly unlikely that everyone will share the same kind of passion, commitment, and discipline that you have for your project. Not to say that you should lower expectations and accept underachievement, but it is important to pick your battles and do everything possible to maintain a positive experience for everyone involved.

~The influences~

Lynn Hallie Najem and the work she does to produce Shorewood Summer Drama program each year has been one of the greatest sources of inspiration for my experiences both in theatre and theatre education. Having been a young actor in her program since age eight and hired as choreographer/assistant director for the past seven years, I have grown from Lynn's student to colleague to friend. Participating in Shorewood Summer Drama remains an experience that has shaped my life by giving me confidence and a direction in which I desire to move forth. Before joining the drama program I was a timid girl who was too tall for dance and too un-athletic for sports. Drama gave me a place where I fit in and where my talents were cultivated as I began to develop more self-confidence and a greater sense of self-worth, a concept I struggled with.

Lynn teaches music in the Madison Metropolitan School District and has run this drama program for many years. Watching her work with kids proved an incredible teaching tool for me. She manages to maintain a

(generally) focused rehearsal space while still having a good time, a crucial yet difficult task when working with kids. The longevity of her program proves its effectiveness: the kids come back year after year.

Shorewood Summer Drama served as a blueprint for Glass Slipper Summer Drama, a program designed, produced, and directed by my best friend, Allie Boldt, and me. The program ran for four years and provided excellent groundwork for my capstone project. My capstone program most closely resembled this program as it took the same two-week form and relied heavily on the support of Bethel Lutheran Church, where we rehearsed and advertised our program. Jacqui Shanda took the chance back then and agreed to support a program directed by two thirteen year-olds and has continued to lend assistance and encouragement throughout the years.

Having worked with both of these drama programs helped me tremendously in planning Bethel Summer Drama Program for my Capstone Project. I knew what had worked in the past and what could be improved on. Taking my observations and experiences, I channeled them directly into a new program that I believed built upon the positive aspects of the other programs and improved upon their weaknesses. If I were to do the program again next year, there would of course be changes that I'd make based on my new experiences.

The Artist's Workshop at Syracuse University—a weekly workshop for actors with disabilities, for which I served as a facilitator—not only

provided me with leadership skills and an arsenal of theatre tools (warm-ups, exercises, games, etc.) but also gave me inspiration and enthusiasm for theatre education to take into this new project.

In all of my classes at Syracuse drama I have gleaned knowledge about acting, voice, movement, and life that have helped infuse this program with a depth that had been lacking in the previous children's theatre programs that I've worked with. A more sophisticated warm-up as well as the integration of acting exercises into the rehearsal process stand out as additions that have heightened the educational experience for these children, without undercutting the fun. At the core of everything we did were humor, silliness, and fun. One of the kids wrote on their evaluation of the program "Laura was kind of crazy. In a good way," a character description I was happy to accept, even though it made no mention of my great intellect or stunning beauty. Some things escape children.

The warm-up was based on material that I had learned primarily in Lizzie Ingram's voice/verse class, and in Steve Cross's movement class. I adapted the exercises to be appropriate for beginning actors and presented them as a systematic approach to preparing yourself for rehearsal. Each new element was added on day by day until the entire warm-up was part of everyone's vocabulary and daily practice. The actors picked up on the various components rather quickly and I found the warm-up to be a successful starting point for each rehearsal.

The acting exercises were incredibly useful and I found that the kids quickly gained an understanding of the exercises and provided really wonderful feedback, which I did not expect due to their level of hyper-activity. I learned these exercises from Geri Clark, as well as other directors and teachers that I've had. The kids were prompted to explore the differences between the ways in which they walk, talk, and think as themselves and how that changes when you are playing a character. The children took a lot of risks and made big, loud choices, amusing themselves and me (but probably not generating a lot of positive response from the people in the offices nearby trying to work). The goal was for this work to seep into their rehearsal and performance of the play.

I also had them fill out a character interview—primarily to give them something to do when they were offstage that would keep them quiet for a few minutes—that yielded some really creative and well thought out responses. All of the questions that I asked are questions that a trained actor would automatically look for and answer within themselves, but for these kids, having the questions posed for them provided an impetus to delve deeper, an important step in their character development that might have otherwise been overlooked.

~The Outcome~

When the curtain went up, the house was entirely packed, extra chairs lining the back of the auditorium and squeezed into the balcony. The Oakwood Resident sitting next to my mother said that she had never seen the auditorium so full. Playing to a full house is a remarkable experience and I am so glad that these children had that opportunity. The audience brought a fantastic energy, which really fed the actors' enthusiasm, confidence, and sense of fun. I think the audience members realized how important drama programs like this one can be to the kids in their community, helping to bring these kids together and allowing them to develop their creativity and performance skills while having a great time.

Despite a few lengthy scene changes—in which I crossed my fingers and mentally pulled them onstage and willed for the lights to please come up—the show went remarkably well. All of our hard work really shined through and impressed everyone. The adrenaline kicked in and the songs and dances really popped, which made the hours of running them completely worth it. The kids just beamed and were so proud of what they had accomplished, which was the most fun for me. Well, that and doing “the running man” in the parking lot of the ice cream shop after the show at the cast party. I found myself relishing in the unexpected. Moments such as Aaron trying desperately to get backstage through the center of the curtain, trying once, twice, and then giving up

and going to the side to exit. It was true comedy that couldn't have been rehearsed.

After talking with parents, reading their thank-you notes, and going through their written evaluations, it was clear that in their point of view, the program was successful. They appreciated the values that this program strived towards and saw growth in their children, in creativity, maturity, and self-confidence. Parents commented on the ways in which their children learned to accept a role graciously and work together as an ensemble to create the world of the play. The idea of an ensemble is very important to me personally; it is the way I prefer to do and see theatre. Taking the ego out of the performance allows for much more creativity and a sense of ownership over the play, even for those who have a "smaller" role. Despite the short, two-week rehearsal period, I tried very hard to spend time for the kids to get to know one another. Many parents and students stated that they made new friends throughout these two weeks and, above all, had fun.

I hoped that this program would serve as an introduction to theatre in a way that inspired self-confidence, creativity, maturity, discipline, humor, and a sense of play. I wanted these students to use the acting tools that they learned throughout the program to develop a character and go through the entire process of putting on a play, from the auditions to the cast party following the final curtain. I think, in terms of those goals, this project was a success.

There were days when I left feeling exhausted and frustrated with the kids, but I witnessed some remarkable feats and transformations, which made all of the moments where I would go home and sing lines from the show such as “It’s a hard-knock life for [me]” vanish under the cloak of the bigger picture. Only four members of the cast were of the male persuasion, but they presented a unique challenge. Together their energies caused disruption in the form of pushing, climbing on stacks of chairs, and talking incessantly, trying to be funny. I had to be careful to place them far enough apart during dances and re-direct their energy towards something positive, such as giving one of them the leadership role of keeping people quiet backstage. When apart from one another, each boy was more focused and involved in the scene or number.

One of the little boys refused to come into the room on the day of auditions. Jacqui and I both tried, to no avail, to persuade him to re-join the group. After Natalie spent the day out in the hall talking to him, his mother came to pick him up and between the two of us we were able to get him into the room. I told him that he didn’t have to audition if he was frightened, but I did convince him to let me give him a couple of lines. He is a different child, which did not go unnoticed by the other kids, making it hard for him to feel comfortable with the group. By the end of the program he was really enjoying the show and having a lot of fun with his, albeit small, part. He made a friend in one of the girls in the program, which was adorable to watch.

I liken directing children's theatre as something akin to childbirth. There are points that are painful and just plain awful but in the end something really beautiful comes out of it. And then you forget about the bad parts and go ahead and do it again a year later.

~Acknowledgements~

I would like to acknowledge the work of Natalie Hagopian, my assistant in this endeavor. She helped me by making it possible to divide the group into smaller sections in order to accomplish the most we could and keep everyone as involved as possible. She ran lines and dances with members of the cast and took charge of snack, which gave me time to adjust the schedule for the second half of rehearsal as well as gather my thoughts (and what was left of my sanity, on select days). She is not a natural leader and was not comfortable taking charge of the class, but I hope that this experience increased her confidence, making her feel more prepared to take on a leadership role in the future.

Erin Grier went above and beyond as accompanist. Not only is she an accomplished pianist and accompanist (two very different skill sets), but also was joy to work with, always willing to step in and help with kids or to participate in activities. She proved a remarkable asset to this program, allowing me time to focus solely on the actors instead of worrying about playing the piano as well. Her laid-back personality had a

calming effect on the room, on me especially, and I had a great time working with her.

I'd like to mention Emily Erdman, CC Schifano, Bella Newman, and Marian Herzog; four girls from Shorewood Summer Drama that stepped in to help with lighting, sound, and the transition from rehearsal room to theatre. All four of these ladies participated in the five-week program at Shorewood Summer Drama and had been at the Oakwood Village Theatre before. They knew how to set up the microphone system and figure out all of the technical aspects of the show that needed to be taken care of during dress rehearsals. I couldn't have done it without their help. Also, a big thank you to Oakwood Village for the use of their beautiful auditorium and all of the help they offered in preparation for the performance.

My brother, Joey Borgwardt helped by coming to two rehearsals and the performance to video portions of the process and product. He edited the footage into a short documentary to accompany this paper as a more tangible reflection of my project. I think that being able to see pieces of the program will help to give readers a fuller understanding of the project, its goals, challenges, and strengths.

Thank you to Lizzie Ingram for assuming the position of advisor on this project. Her confidence in me and the program, as well as her guidance throughout the process, has been a tremendous asset to my capstone project and has made it an enjoyable experience. I'd also like to

thank Geri Clark for acting as honors reader. Her expertise in theatre education as well as a tremendous literary ability make her an ideal person for the job.

Lynn Hallie Najem continues to be my mentor and friend and I appreciate everything she does for me. I thank her here primarily for donating the use of her microphone sound system for the performance, but her contribution to the program goes far beyond that, though indirectly. Every year that I work with her I learn new things about directing children's theatre, implementing classroom management, and maintaining forever a wonderful sense of humor.

Jacqui Shanda proved, as always, an incredible asset to this program. As the Director of Education at Bethel Lutheran Church and a former employer and current mentor of mine, her interest lies in the success of children's programming at Bethel. She constantly lent support to me as well as to the kids and parents, helping primarily with organization and producing roles. She piloted the advertisement efforts, especially during the spring when I was still in Syracuse. The program could not have taken place without her help.

I also would like to thank Bethel Lutheran Church for providing us with a generous grant, given by the Bethel Foundation. This grant allowed us to purchase the rights for our desired show through Music Theatre International and to offer the program to children at a highly subsidized

cost. I hope the Bethel Foundation continues to fund a drama program at Bethel in the future.

And, of course, I'd like to thank The Renée Crown Honors Program for their support throughout this process. Eric Holzwarth and Hanna Richardson deserve special thanks for their willingness to help me and answer any questions I had about capstone or honors requirements in general. I appreciated their help and support.

~Summary~

Ideally, a Capstone Project should be the pinnacle point of a student's career in the Honors Department, a culmination and demonstration of everything they've learned while at Syracuse University. It should also display a passion for the work and for what that work means to a larger community. As I thought about how my capstone project might manifest itself, I knew that it must include theatre and education, two realms in which I adore working and find to be of the utmost importance in child and community development. Merging my love of acting and my passion for teaching drama and music to children, I sought to develop and implement a summer musical theatre intensive in which students would learn acting, singing, and dancing techniques as they formed a cohesive and supportive ensemble of players. During the two-week period, the students went through the entire process of putting on a play: from audition, to rehearsal, to final curtain. Throughout the program I strove to create a positive environment and group dynamic in which all of the students felt comfortable and successful.

I aimed to transform work I had done in college to an age and skill set-appropriate level for these students. Using knowledge I had acquired from my many classes within the drama department at Syracuse as well as my past involvement in theatre education, I developed a set of voice,

movement, and acting exercises suitable for seven to twelve year-olds to use in rehearsals. These activities offered a fun way to explore the various complexities of drama, such as character, without overwhelming the young actors with techniques outside their sphere of comprehension and appreciation. I aspired to teach in a way that drove the actors forward into situations demanding creative solutions, but not so far as to make them close off to the work. This proved to be somewhat of a challenge given the vast difference in mental development between a seven year-old just starting out as a first-grade student and a twelve year-old bridging the gap between elementary and middle school. On the other end of the spectrum, the disparity between ages also established an environment in which students had to take on the role of leader for their younger cast mates, which, when it occurred, was beautiful to witness.

My teaching methods stem from a multitude of examples of teachers that I've found to be inspiring and effective and habits that I've picked up throughout my career as a student and as a teacher. As a young teaching artist I had to wrestle with the oftentimes-clouded barriers between instructor and friend. I wanted the kids to respect me both as a qualified educator and as a fun and imaginative human being, someone in whom they could confide. Over the course of this program and through my teaching experience this year—both directly working with kids as well as observing other teaching artists and how they handle their classroom—I

have learned a lot about classroom management skills and how those might be better put to use in future programs I undertake.

This program taught me many lessons about my teaching style: I learned what worked and what could be improved. Learning to let go and trust that everything would work out helped me establish a greater sense of ease and allowed me to view the program in its entirety rather than incurring a blinding focus on certain aspects. Each day brought with it its own challenges and its own surprises. The energy of the room could change in an instant and be affected by a single person—and I include myself in that group. The exercises I did with the kids provoked their thinking in a different way that I found to be very valuable. If I were to do this program again, I would schedule more rehearsal time so that more exercises could be utilized without taking away time from the play rehearsals.

In addition to affecting the direct participants of the program, this program influenced parents, audience members, and others involved in the creative or administrative process of putting together this project. Parents commented that they saw growth in their children, as actors and as responsible students. With only two weeks of rehearsal together, much of the responsibility lay with the students to rehearse and memorize their parts outside of class. They sought the assistance of a parent, babysitter, or beloved pet to run lines with them, practice the songs together, and watch them dance the choreography accompanied by the rehearsal CD. In

that respect, this program was very much a group effort of everyone involved.

Comprised of parents, friends, family, Bethel members, and Oakwood Village Residents, the audience embraced the performers and acknowledged the work that they had done and the community they had formed over the short rehearsal period. Perhaps they gleaned from this experience the importance of theatre and community and will continue to support such endeavors in the future.

My goal was not only to teach these children the basics of theatre and help them develop as actors but also to facilitate their growth into confident young people, a capacity that they can carry with them into their everyday lives. Theatre has had a significant impact on my life, transforming me into a more creative, confident actor and person. I hoped that through this introduction to theatre, students would gain a sense of self-confidence and the ability to make creative choices both onstage and in life.